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**SERMON CLIII.**

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**PRIVATE PRAYER.**

MATT. vi. 6.—*But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet.*

PRIVATE prayer, in distinction from family, social, and public prayer, is founded on the private and personal wants, sins, and obligations of men. In discoursing upon the subject, it seems in order, to speak, **I. Of the PLACE.** "Enter into thy closet"—thy retired chamber, or secret apartment. Be alone. This direction was originally given in opposition to the publicity of prayer as offered by the Pharisees in "synagogues and at the corners of the streets." The direction may be easily complied with by those who have a home suited to their convenience. No matter what room, chamber, or part of the house it be, provided you can be alone. But if, like the Savior, you have not "where to lay your head," if your house furnishes no conveniences, or circumstances prevent retirement at home; then you may select any other spot which will afford retreat from observation. Jesus often made a mountain, a wilderness, a garden, his closet; and many of his followers have made theirs in out-houses, caverns, groves, and under the open canopy of heaven.

"Where'er we seek him, he is found,  
And every place is holy ground."

But the question may here be asked; ought we studiously to conceal our private devotions? Or if we cannot be strictly private, may we omit them? My opinion is, we ought to do nothing with the intention of having it known that we pray in secret; but select our place for the exercise so as to be least likely to attract notice, and regulate our voice so as not to be overheard, except by him who heareth in secret. Yet obviously, every person in a family, who daily and regularly retires for prayer, is liable to be known so to do;—but this furnishes no good reason why he should neglect the duty.

**II. The time for private prayer.** The importance of having a  
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stated and regular time, must be obvious to all. We shall then be sure not to forget or neglect the duty. If we have no definite rule on the subject, but leave the time for prayer to be decided by circumstances, it will generally be an irregular, hurried, and unprofitable service; our minds will often be in an unsettled state, and whether to pray now or at another time, will be a question so frequently recurring, that we shall probably dismiss the duty altogether, to relieve ourselves from embarrassment.

But *when* shall the time be fixed? Nature and scripture point out morning and evening as the most suitable seasons. In the morning, some will find it best to pray on first rising from their beds; others, after attending to necessary domestic cares. In the evening, many can most advantageously do it about the going down of the sun; but others, not till all the labors of the day are finished. Let me only suggest, that you should sacredly guard the fixed times for prayer against the encroachments of the world. If possible, let not worldly business be pushed so hard and so late as to unfit your soul for its evening offering; let not evening company, visits, or even religious meetings, destroy your relish or waste your strength for secret devotion.

Is it next asked, *how frequently* shall we pray? This depends so much on circumstances, that no rule applicable to all can be given. David says, "Evening, and morning, and at noon, he shall hear my voice." Daniel "kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed and gave thanks." "Cornelius, a devout man, prayed to God always:" that is, as I understand it, at the stated hours of prayer observed by the Jews—three times a day. Peter was engaged in private prayer "about the sixth hour," or noon. Most saints, distinguished for a close walk with God, have thrice a day entered into their closets. "I have found the benefit of your advice," said a young Christian to his pastor, "in adding noon to my former seasons of prayer, morning and evening." As a general rule, morning and evening must not be dispensed with;—and whoever can, consistently with his other duties, retire like David and Daniel, at noon also, will find as a consequence,

"Sweet pleasures rise from things unseen,  
Beyond this world of time."

It may further be inquired, *how much* time shall be devoted to this sacred exercise? On this point too, the Scriptures are not explicit. It must depend, in a measure, on the nature and number of other duties; on the specific objects for which we pray; and in some degree on the spirit and feelings of the occasion. When we have unusual freedom and fervor—when we most intensely desire some spiritual benefit, or when great results are depending—then more time than ordinary ought to be devoted to it. Before Christ chose his twelve apostles, he spent a whole night in prayer. Jacob, at Peniel, intent on securing the blessing of the Angel of the covenant, continued his supplication till break of day. Colonel Gardiner, whose engagements were often such that he could have but one season of retirement a day, used to spend two hours in devotion before going out in the morning. Martin Lu-

ther thought three hours every day were little enough to spend in prayer. These were noble examples ; let those who can, imitate them. There is very little danger, in these days of spiritual declension, of erring in spending too much time in this service. The danger all lies on the other side. I admire the rule observed by the pious Bradford ; " he would not give over confessing any sin, till he felt some brokenness of heart for it, and would not cease praying for a particular blessing, till he felt some relish of it in his soul." Were it needful to express a more decided opinion in regard to the time to be spent in secret devotion, at each season, I would give that of the author of "*Advice to a Young Christian*:" *It is good to stipulate with yourself for half an hour.* This time, at least, may be profitably occupied in self-examination and reading the Scriptures, together with prayer.

Two questions of a practical kind may here be asked. First, Should we so strictly observe set times for prayer, as to attempt the duty, if we do not feel the spirit of prayer ; or, as some express it, are not moved by the Spirit to pray ? To which I answer, unquestionably we should : for our *feelings* can never be made the standard of our duty. And if we feel a reluctance to pray, it is evident we have then some sin to confess and some blessing to crave ; so that we need, it may be, to pray the more. Besides, if we adopt the rule, to pray only when we happen to *feel* like it, Satan and a wicked heart will allow us but few opportunities. I once knew a Christian female who was induced to act on this unscriptural rule, of praying only when " the Spirit moved her to do it ;" and she became the prey and sport of temptation, and was for a long time left in a state of most distressing gloom and doubts, of her piety. You might as well neglect public worship, family prayer, reading the Scriptures, and every other duty which you owe to God, or your fellow-men, when you happen to feel disinclined or backward to it, as to neglect private prayer for this reason.

The second question is, Whether those who join in family prayer ought also to pray in secret ; especially, ought he to do it who leads the family devotions ? Certainly, as a general rule ; because the design of family prayer is different from that of private ; and no one can offer such a kind of prayer in the presence of others, as the private and personal wants of his soul demand. You can no more make family prayer a substitute for private, than you can public prayer, for family ; or preaching on the Sabbath, for the private reading of the Scriptures. In short, you can never throw the personal concerns of your soul into a common stock with a family, or even a church, so as to render private prayer needless. The publican spoke what his own heart felt, when he smote upon his breast, and cried, " God be merciful to me a sinner !" No one could possibly have uttered that prayer in the publican's behalf.

Thus far I have spoken only of the ordinary seasons of prayer ; but besides these, there are special and extraordinary ones, which every Christian will need to observe : such was that of David, when he prayed for the life of his child ; of Daniel, when he set his face to seek the Lord God for the return of the Jews from captivity ; and of

Nehemiah, when he was about to make request to King Artaxerxes. Our Savior engaged in special prayer at the time of his baptism; before electing his twelve apostles; on the mount of transfiguration; and during his agony in the garden of Gethsemane. So ought we to observe special seasons of prayer. How obviously suitable is it, that more time should be spent on the Sabbath in secret devotion, than can be ordinarily on other days! Who but must pray more when about to begin an important and difficult enterprise, or to assume weighty responsibilities, or in a season of great domestic affliction, or of general attention to religion, than he does ordinarily? And under a penitential sense of past unfaithfulness and present sin, it is suitable and even necessary for individuals to observe days of fasting and special prayer, for the pardoning mercy of God.

III. Let us next consider some of the PECULIAR ADVANTAGES of private prayer.

It allows of *much greater freedom* than we can use at other times. Both in social and family prayer—much more in public—we are restrained from confessing our personal sins, except in general terms: we must then, also, suit our expressions to the wants and circumstances of our fellow-worshippers. But when alone, with no hearing ear but that of God, with no eye but his upon us, we can, without fear or restraint, pour out our complaints, make to him our confessions, and tell him all our wants and our sorrows. You well know with what freedom you converse when alone with your best friend—so it is with the soul in solitary communion with God. Oh, could you sometimes listen at the closet door of a Christian, what heart-affecting confessions would you hear! what sighs and groans of penitence! what earnest cries for pardon! what importunity in supplication for others; what grateful acknowledgments; what outpouring of the whole heart to God!

Private prayer has also a most happy influence upon a person's *feelings* and *temper*. How soothing and invigorating in the morning, to hold a season of retired communion with God; to give him thanks for the mercies of the night; to implore his guidance through the day; his defence against temptations, and his grace, as a shield, against sin! With what cheerfulness too may a Christian go out from his closet to engage in the duties, and to meet the dangers and trials of the day before him! And when he retires from his labors at evening, and in his closet has held communion with his covenant God; then with an approving conscience and heavenly calmness, he commits himself to the divine protection, and lays his head upon his pillow! Account for it as you may—I believe the fact is unquestionable—that private prayer so regulates and tranquillizes the mind, gives it such a balance, self-possession, and reliance on divine aid, that it happily fits a person for the performance of his most common duties, and enables him to accomplish more and do it better than he otherwise could. What but prayer gave Nehemiah such firmness in building the walls of Jerusalem amid insults and opposition? What else enabled Daniel to brave the horrors of the lions' den? Sir Matthew Hale, in his letters to his chil-

dren, says ; " If I omit praying and reading a portion of God's blessed Word in the morning, nothing goes well with me all the day." Dr. Boerhaave said, " that his daily practice of retiring for an hour in the morning, and spending it in devotion and meditation, gave him firmness and vigor for the business of the whole day." Dr. Doddridge used frequently to observe, " that he never advanced well in human learning without prayer ; and that he always made the most proficiency in his studies when he prayed with the greatest fervency." Luther had written on the door of his study, "*Bene orasse, est bene studuisse*"—*To have prayed well, is to have studied well.* How well does the experience of Christians, in the more retired and ordinary walks of life, accord with the facts above mentioned. Have you not found that daily private devotion has the effect of composing your mind and giving you vigor in business ? When you neglect it or hurry it over, do you not feel the sad effects in a discomposed frame, a disturbed conscience, and in unsteadiness of purpose ? Those of you who wholly neglect private prayer, may think little of this advantage of it :—you, perhaps, feel able to pursue your labors and meet the trials and temptations of life without God's blessing—but, alas ! you may learn, when too late to profit by it, how unwisely you judge, and how presumptuously you act.

Again,—Private prayer is one of the most important means of *growth in grace*. As the affections which are then called forth are fresh, lively, and vigorous, and as a corresponding impression is felt on the heart that exercises them ; the closet hence becomes an index of a person's spirituality. His evidences of personal holiness and of progress in religion brighten or grow dim, very much in proportion to his faithfulness in private devotions. "Apostacy," says Mr. Henry, "begins at the closet door." If, my brethren, I knew the history of your closets—if I knew the frequency of your visits there—the time you spend—the motives that influence you—the manner in which you conduct while there ; I should not fear to hazard an opinion respecting the state of your souls ! Your comparative improvement in the Christian life might, by this test, very accurately be judged of. Of some of you, I trust, it would be manifest, that you "are growing up to the measure of the stature of perfect ones in Christ Jesus ;" of others, I fear, that your growth is exceedingly slow, almost imperceptible ; and of others still, that the graces of the Spirit, if alive at all, are languid and withered.

Private prayer, moreover, *procures the blessing of God upon others*. All the promises to prayer in general, may be claimed for prayer offered in secret. In that hallowed retreat, the Christian has power with God ; there "he moves the hand that moves the world." Feeble as the instrumentality is, in itself ; yet, through the promise of God, its results are great and lasting on the conversion of sinners ; the spread of the Redeemer's kingdom ; the peace and welfare of mankind upon earth, and their destiny in eternity !

I only add—*great is the reward* promised to him that prayeth in secret. "Thy father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly."



There, truly, he manifests himself to his supplicating children, in the endearing character of FATHER ! There, he inspires them with confidence to cry, "Abba, Father!"—and there he gives them an earnest of the joys which are "at his right-hand." Turn to the closet experience of almost any Christian, and how comforting and joyful is it often ! "I would not," says a lady, in her diary—"I would not be hired out of my closet for a thousand worlds. I never enjoy such hours of pleasure, and such free and entire communion with God, as I have here ; and I wonder that any can live prayerless, and deprive themselves of the greatest privilege allowed them." "In prayer," says the missionary Martyn, "I had a most precious view of Christ, as a friend that sticketh closer than a brother ! I hardly know how to contemplate with praise enough his adorable excellences. Who can show forth all his praise ? I can conceive it to be a theme long enough for eternity. I want no other happiness, no other sort of heaven !" Brainerd, in his journal, records ; "I spent an hour in prayer with great intenseness and freedom, and with the most soft and tender affection towards mankind. O ! it is an emblem of heaven to love all the world with a love of kindness, forgiveness, and benevolence. My soul was sweetly resigned to God's disposal of me—I confided in him that he would never leave me, though I should walk through the valley of the shadow of death." How often did Payson write in his journal, "Had a sweet season in prayer this morning, and felt fervent love to my Savior, and desires that he might be glorified." But why should I multiply examples ? Have you not experienced in your own souls the blessed reward of prayer in secret ? Do you not know what the presence of God means ? what communion of soul with him is ? Have you never, in the closet, seen his goodness pass before you ? never had, while there, sweet foretastes of heaven, and joyous anticipations of that "open reward," which he will give you in the presence of congregated worlds ? That reward, I conceive, will be the same in kind as that which you now receive. It will be *open*, that is, public and manifest to the whole intelligent universe. Then you will receive an answer to all your prayers, in a full justification before God, complete sanctification, confirmation in holiness, and in being admitted to his immediate "presence, where is fulness of joy, and to a seat at his right-hand, where are pleasures for evermore."

Having thus offered some suggestions relative to the duty of private prayer, and exhibited the advantages of it, I would, in conclusion,

First, address all the members of this church who are present. Beloved brethren, do you pray in your closets ? From many hearts, I hear the reply, "We do." Have you stated and regular hours for this duty ? are you punctual in it ? do you take sufficient time ? do you not neglect the service, when your affections are languid, or because you pray in your family ? do you observe any special seasons of prayer ; and do you occasionally unite fasting with this exercise ? I would also ask, my brethren, what advantages do you derive from private prayer ? Can you pour out your soul with freedom before God in private ? do you derive from it a happy influence on your feelings and temper ; and

does it prove to you one important means of growth in grace? Do you enjoy the devotions of the closet; find nearness to God there, and experience in your soul that peace and joy, that resignation to the divine will, love to mankind and foretaste of heavenly bliss, which other Christians have experienced, and which are a part of the reward promised to secret prayer? If, brethren, you cannot answer these questions in the affirmative, what is the reason? Is there no efficacy or use in prayer? or has the promise of God failed? Rather, is there not a fault and a failure in you? Examine yourselves. If you daily enter into your closet, and yet derive no benefit from the duty, and find no enjoyment there, you may be sure that "sin lieth at the door," and that "your iniquities separate between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear." Does not conscience accuse you of living in some allowed sin, either towards God, or your neighbor, or both? Do you cherish no secret sin,—indulge no vicious appetite,—gratify no unhallowed lust? Do you live in peace and love with your Christian brethren, and in charity with all men? Is there no command or divine institution which you disregard? Do you set your heart upon the discharge of every known duty, and "herein exercise yourself to have a conscience void of offence both towards God and towards men?" If, on examination, conscience accuses you of living in any sort of sin, then you may know the true reason why your closet devotions are barren and joyless. Let it be written in large capitals on your closet door, "IF I REGARD INIQUITY IN MY HEART, THE LORD WILL NOT HEAR ME."

Do any of you, who are members of this church, wholly neglect private prayer? I pause—and tremble for the reply. I seem to hear one, and another, and yet another, answer, "I do—I confess I do." What, then, is your experience? What progress do you make in spiritual religion? What do you know of communion with God? How do you honor your religious professions before the world? I would also seriously and affectionately ask you, Why you do not pray in secret? Have you no need? no time? no desire! Then, how do you know you are a Christian? from what do you infer it? on what evidence do you rely? It is a mark of the hypocrite, "that he does not always call upon God;" and I beseech you examine well, and see if this is not a conclusive mark against you.

Are there any present who formerly prayed in secret, but now neglect the duty? My friends, have you proved the promises of God to be deceptive? If not, why do you forsake the place once consecrated to prayer? Are not your wants as great now as ever? Have you no sins to be forgiven? Has that soul, whose infinite worth you once felt, lost its value? Can you now brave the terrors of death, and go, without another prayer, to the tribunal of God, your Judge? Can you be willing that it should be recorded against you in the book of God's remembrance—This is the man that once bowed unto me in his closet; that once cried for pardoning mercy; that once sued for an interest in the Savior's love: but afterward shut, no more to open, his closet door; broke his most solemn vows; committed again

the sins, for the pardon of which he had prayed, and turned away from the Savior, whose merits and righteousness were proffered to him. Oh! my friends—return, return speedily to prayer! Peradventure there is yet hope! “Seek the Lord while he is yet to be found; call ye upon him while he is yet near.”

Finally—Are there any who have hitherto neglected private prayer? any so busy in the pursuits or pleasures of the world, that they find no time for this duty? any so thoughtless of their immortal destiny, and of the account which they must soon give at the bar of God, as not to feel the need of it? Is there one who up to the present time has had no closet for private prayer, and no heart for the duty—to him would I speak. Oh! wert thou soon to be visited with sickness—to see ghastly death approaching to seize thee—how would thy cries ascend to God for mercy! Thou wouldst not, methinks, be willing to die, without at least one prayer. The cry would be extorted from thee, “God be merciful to me a sinner!”—“Lord, save, or I perish!” If such would be thy cry in death, when probably it would be unavailing, why not make it now, while there is hope? Now God is on the throne of mercy, and through Jesus the Mediator, thou canst have access to him. He waits to be gracious; he is ready to hear, and pardon, and save the penitent suppliant. But soon he will be seated on the throne of judgment! No prayer will then avail. Thy cries will be lost, amid groans of despair, the sound of the last trumpet, and the convulsions of a ruined world! Call then upon him now. He bends from his mercy-seat to hear and save! Let the prayer of thy heart, offered in silence here, be repeated, and urged with fresh importunity in thy closet at home. Henceforth let that be said of thee, that was said of Saul of Tarsus, “Behold, he prayeth.” Daily, to the end of life, “enter into thy closet, and pray to thy Father who seeth in secret, and he will reward thee openly.” AMEN.

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## SERMON CLIV.

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BY REV. NATHANIEL BOUTON.

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### SOCIAL PRAYER.

MATT. xviii. 19, 20.—*Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father who is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.*

I HAVE selected this passage as the foundation of a discourse on SOCIAL PRAYER. If, in the first place, you ask, wherein this kind of prayer differs from other kinds, it will be sufficiently explicit to say;



it differs from secret prayer, in that two or more are united in it; from family prayer, in that it is not offered by the master or head of a family, as such, at the stated hours of morning and evening devotions; but by persons, however related, who are agreed to pray for blessings which they desire in common. And it differs from public prayer, in that it is offered in more retired places, and at times not particularly enjoined by divine or human authority. Meetings for such prayer may be stated or occasional—may be held for *special* purposes: as to beseech God to avert his judgments; to grant wisdom and guidance in times of doubt and difficulty; to save the church from divisions, or declensions; or to revive the spirit of true religion. Or such meetings may be held for objects of ordinary interest and utility; as the promotion of Christian fellowship, improvement in personal piety, the success of the word preached, and of other means employed for the advancement of true religion.

In the next place, it may be asked, what *warrant* have we for this kind of prayer? To which I answer,

First, it is warranted by the social nature of our religion: we are brethren, and as such it is suitable we should meet for prayer, as well as for other religious services; we have common interests, and these can with the greatest advantage be pleaded before the throne of grace in union. Suppose Christians, enjoying the hope of heaven should live without any intercourse. Each one alone cultivates as he is able the graces of the Spirit; but together they hold no religious conversation; meet on no occasions for Christian fellowship; but, in respect to their religion, are as much alone as the recluse in a wilderness. Is it not manifest that in such a case they would be greatly deficient in some parts of Christian character? Where would be that "endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit," which is enjoined? or love to the brotherhood, or bearing one another's burdens, or weeping with them that weep, or rejoicing with them that rejoice, or forbearing one another and forgiving one another, or preferring others to themselves, or even praying one for another? In the case supposed, not one of the social duties of religion could be duly performed; nor one of the social religious affections properly exercised. To live thus, therefore, unless it were necessary, would be contrary to the very nature of our religion.

But we have also express *Scripture* warrant for social prayer. The text is in point: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." "If two of you shall agree on earth, touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father who is in heaven." Now, supposing that this passage has primary reference to prayer for miraculous interposition; yet it recognises union in that exercise—it is *social* prayer which most effectually secures such aid. But neither the language of the text, nor the connection in which it stands, restricts the meaning to prayer for miraculous purposes. Agreement touching "any thing" that they shall ask, is too comprehensive a phrase to be restricted simply to things which it requires miraculous power to accomplish; and the promise,

"where"—wherever on earth—"two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them"—that promise is too broad to be limited to the twelve apostles, or to the short period in which miracles were continued in the church. The language which is used need only be restricted by the nature of the case, or by other passages of Scripture. Thus we know that the promise to grant "any thing" touching which two shall agree in prayer, must be limited to things lawful and proper—to things which on the whole will be for God's glory; and the prayer must be offered in faith and submission, as well as in union.

We have, moreover, *examples* of social prayer in Scripture. Immediately after the ascension of Christ, the disciples in an upper room "all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication." On the day of Pentecost, "they were all with one accord in one place." Peter and John, being let go from the Jewish council, went to their own company, and reported all that had been done, and said to them—"and they all lifted their voice with one accord," in prayer to God. When Peter was put in prison by Herod, "prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him;" not however in one public assembly, but in retired social meetings: for after his release he found, in the "house of Mary the mother of John, many were gathered together praying for him." Daniel and his three friends were accustomed to meet for prayer on occasions of special interest. Esther engaged her brethren in fasting and praying, while she went uncalled into the presence of the king; and Nehemiah and his countrymen made their united prayer to God for success in building the walls of Jerusalem. These scriptural examples, the text, and the social nature of our religion, are then a sufficient warrant for *social prayer*.

In the third place, I would offer a few suggestions *on the principles* upon which meetings for social prayer may be formed and regulated.

They should be *voluntary*; that is, should be commenced and continued in accordance with the wishes and hearty consent of those interested in them. The Scriptures speak of social prayer in a different manner from what they do of other religious services. The language is, "If two of you *are agreed*." "They were with *one accord* in one place." On general grounds, we may urge social prayer as a duty binding on the conscience. We may say it is our duty to use all suitable means of religious improvement, and to advance the Redeemer's kingdom; and as social prayer conduces to these ends, we ought to engage in it spontaneously.

But further,—the meetings, being voluntarily commenced, should be regularly attended. Why agree to begin, unless determined to continue? If the object for which you agree to pray is good, it should be persevered in till accomplished. To absent yourselves from the place of prayer, because you do not feel the Spirit of devotion, or because attendance requires a little self-denial, is disheartening to others, and may destroy the meeting itself. For "two or three" are requisite for social prayer, and when you are absent without a substantial reason, how do you know that enough will be together to claim the promise?

But again, there should be union as to the *object* of a social prayer meeting. Let the question of the members be, for what do we meet?—What do we agree to pray for? In deciding this, take comprehensive views of your own circumstances, of the church, and of the world. As to the various subjects of prayer, it may be said, “the field is the world.” But out of this spacious field, you should select some one or more objects, which shall be the burden of your prayer. You may pray for your own growth in grace, for your brethren, for the conversion of your children, friends, or neighbors; for a revival of religion, for the success of missions, for ministers of the gospel, for the universal diffusion of gospel light, and the triumphant reign of the Redeemer on earth. But it is essential to the profit and interest of social prayer that the object of the meeting be well understood and adhered to.

Let the prayers also be pertinent; for example, if you meet to pray for a revival of religion in the church or town where you reside, limit your petitions mainly to that subject, and not embrace other topics which have no connection with it. If you agree to pray for the conversion of your children and friends—it is obviously unsuitable that the chief part of your prayer consist in the confession of your sins, or in thanks for personal favors, or in petitions for the conversion of the heathen. When Queen Esther went in unto the king, it is probable that the prayers offered by her countrymen were solely for her success. When Daniel and his three friends agreed to pray that God would reveal to them the dream of Nebuchadnezzar, other topics were omitted. The prayers offered by the church for Peter when in prison were for his safety and release.

If the object of the meeting be understood, and the prayers be appropriate, they will generally be brief. If you enjoy an uncommon fulness and enlargement of desire in prayer for a particular blessing, there is little danger of wearying those with whom you join; but if you introduce topics foreign to the object of your meeting, your prayers will be extended to such a length as to become wearisome and unprofitable.

Further, it is desirable that social prayer meetings be so organized and conducted, *that all may, in turn, if they will, take a part.* Where the meeting is made up of both males and females, it belongs to the former only to lead in prayer; but females may, with great propriety, meet by themselves, and engage in this exercise. But when met, let all, if they will, take a part. Some are timid, and need encouragement; some inexperienced, and need practice; some backward in duty, and ought to be brought forward; some have too low a sense of their ability, and need to acquire confidence. If each in turn is expected to pray, or is called upon to do it, the gifts of all may be duly exercised and improved, and a common advantage gained. Still the meeting should be so free, that those who attend shall not feel obliged to take a part, or be excluded; for there are persons who enjoy great satisfaction in hearing and uniting with others in prayer, who cannot, or think they cannot, themselves pray to edification.

As to the *frequency* of social prayer meetings, no definite rules can be given. In general, it is desirable to meet as often at least as once a week. But the frequency must be determined by the circumstances of those who attend—by their nearness to each other, their domestic duties and relations, their secular engagements, their other opportunities for religious improvement, and by the state of religion in the society where they belong. Sometimes such meetings may properly be held three or four times a week, but I cannot deem it proper to neglect any domestic or other known duty, for the sake of attending so frequently. In this, as well as in other cases, wisdom must direct, and "happy is he who condemneth not himself in the thing which he alloweth."

Permit me also to suggest a few cautions in regard to social prayer meetings. One is, guard against *formality*. A meeting commenced for a particular object may for a while interest you; but the danger is, that after a while your prayers will be languid and formal—that the life and spirit will be gone, while the bare form remains. Better in such a case to vary in some measure the object of your meeting; create a new interest, and stir up each other's minds by new motives. In this connection I may also remark, that it is well, for the sake of variety and interest, to introduce free religious conversation and singing between the prayers which are offered.

Be cautious, also, lest you measure your religion and that of others by social prayers. If you conclude you are a sincere and growing Christian, merely because you are a frequent attendant on social prayer—and especially if you judge others harshly, who are less engaged in this exercise than yourself, you have much reason to suspect your heart of pride and self-righteousness. Remember that the Pharisees prayed "to be seen of men." Examine into your private devotions. Do you love your closet, as well as the social prayer meeting? Are you as careful to live holy in the world as you are to be present at the house of prayer?

Be cautious, also, lest you undervalue the public worship of God, in which you do not take an active part. In nothing is spiritual pride more manifest than in a disposition to magnify our own gifts, and disparage those of others. There are not wanting instances in which persons who have successfully exercised their gifts in social meetings, have acquired such conceited notions of their abilities, that they have absented themselves from the public worship of God, and set up for spiritual guides. If you ever find the thought intruding into your heart, that you can make a social prayer meeting so interesting and profitable as to justify your absence from the public worship of God on the Sabbath; if you are disposed to judge ministers harshly; and if you take more pains to be present at a meeting where you expect to lead, than to be at the sanctuary, where you will only be a hearer, you may be certain that your heart is lifted up with spiritual pride; that Satan has taken the advantage of you, and that your social prayers have become a snare to you. Oh! the pride and deceitfulness of the human heart.

I would now suggest *various inducements* to engage you in social

prayer. And in doing this, I would endeavor to set before you some of the advantages of it. Consider the gracious promise contained in the text. "If two of you shall agree on earth, touching any thing," that is a suitable subject of prayer, "it shall be done for them of my Father who is in heaven." "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." How delightful the thought, that Jesus, as an omnipresent Savior, meets with his praying people where they assemble, in places however remote or obscure. He regards not only the multitude of worshippers assembled in his name on the Sabbath; not only those who meet on great and splendid occasions to celebrate the triumphs of his truth, and the progress of his kingdom—but even two or three met together in a retired room! And oh! how animating the consideration, that at one and the same moment, the cheering presence of Jesus may be felt by the praying companies of his people, however numerous they are, and however retired and unknown to each other. He is present with the little circle that meets in his name in the centre of a city, or a village, or in the thinly inhabited parts of a town. If they feel themselves feeble in gifts, and unworthy to pray—still he is with them. If they are despised by the ungodly, and for their safety are obliged to seek retirement, still they are honored by the presence of him who is King of kings—and whose glory fills the heaven of heavens! Yes,

"Low in the social band he bows  
His still attentive ear,  
And while his angels sing around,  
Delights their voice to hear."

Consider also the *fulness* of the promise: "If two of you are agreed touching any thing, it shall be done." I regard this promise as ensuring efficacy to social prayer, offered in a right manner, for things agreeable to God's will. Not that the blessings craved will always be granted in the way or at the time we may desire: but such united prayer will be heard in heaven, and will be the means of bringing down on the souls of the suppliants, and upon others, the most precious blessings. I agree so entirely with President Edwards on this point, that I cannot forbear quoting his words:—"There is no way that Christians, in a private capacity, can do so much to promote the work of God, and advance the kingdom of Christ, as by prayer. Let persons be never so weak, and never so mean, and under never so poor advantages to do much for Christ and the souls of men otherwise, yet if they have much of the spirit of grace and supplication, in this way they may have power with him that is infinite in power, and has the government of the word. Though they may be private persons, their prayers are put up in the name of a Mediator, that is a public Person, being the Head of the whole church, and the Lord of the universe: and if they have a just sense of the importance of eternal things, and concern for the precious souls of men, yet they need not regret that they are not preachers; they may go in their earnestness and agonies of soul, and pour out their soul before One that is able to do all things."



Moreover, social prayer has a most happy influence upon the persons engaged in it. It makes them acquainted with each other's religious exercises, opens their hearts to each other's view, produces a strong mutual affection, gives encouragement and boldness in the cause of Christ, prompts to holy zeal and activity, that the objects prayed for may be accomplished; and gives vigorous growth to the affections which are called into exercise by the prayers which are offered for various objects. On these points, I may appeal to experience. Tell me, ye who maintain social prayer, who of all the professed followers of Christ are most dear to your hearts? with whose religious character are you best acquainted?—with whom do you take sweetest counsel?—and of whom, in the fulness of your heart, can each of you most truly say, "I love them in the Lord?" Are they not the very ones whom you are accustomed to meet, not only in the sanctuary and at the communion-table, but also in the room for social prayer? Are they not those with whom you have often bowed at the throne of Grace, and whose supplications, intercessions, and thanksgivings have ascended with yours to heaven? Have you not frequently, after having spent an hour in this delightful employment, felt your hearts knit together in love? Have you not lingered, as if reluctant to depart from the consecrated spot, lest you should lose the sweet experience of inward joy? Has not your language, at such seasons, often been,

"When we asunder part,  
It gives us inward pain;  
But we shall still be joined in heart,  
And hope to meet again."

The lamented missionary Parsons, once speaking of his enjoyment in social prayer, said, "We assembled for prayer, and the Lord was in the midst of us; a smile sat upon the face of the saints: this appeared like the gate to heaven." President Edwards, after having parted with Christian friends with whom he had often conversed and prayed, thus expressed his feelings: "My support was in contemplation of the heavenly state—where is the enjoyment of the persons loved, without ever parting: where those persons who appear so lovely in this world will really be inexpressibly more lovely, and full of love to us. And how sweetly will they who mutually love each other join together in singing the praises of God and the Lamb!"

Further, to see the advantages of social prayer, look at facts which evince that God graciously answers it, and makes it the means of promoting his cause in the world. The united prayers of the primitive disciples, assembled in an upper room at Jerusalem, and afterward on the day of Pentecost, were answered in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the conversion of three thousand souls! In answer to the prayer of the company with whom Peter and John met, "the place was shaken where they assembled, and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and spake the word of God with boldness." In answer to the social prayers of the church, an angel released Peter from prison. Generally, times of *uncommon* prosperity to the church have been times of fervent and importunate social as well as secret and public

prayer. Richard Baxter, in accounting for the extraordinary success which attended his preaching at Kidderminster, says, "One advantage which I had was the zeal and diligence of the godly people of the place. They thirsted after the salvation of their neighbors, and were in private my assistants. Some of them were so able in prayer that very few ministers did equal them in order, and fulness, and apt expression, and holy oratory. Abundance of them were able to pray very laudably with their families and others. Once a week, the younger sort, who were not suitable persons to pray in a public assembly, met among a few, more privately, where they spent three hours in prayer together. Every Saturday night, they met at some of their houses, to pray and prepare themselves for the following day." President Edwards, in his account of the great revival in New-England, about the year 1740, says, "The inhabitants of many of our towns are now divided into particular praying societies; most of the people, old and young, have voluntarily associated themselves in distinct companies, for mutual assistance in social worship, in private houses." Mr. Prince, in his account of the revival in Boston in 1741, says, "Private societies for religious exercises, both of younger and elder persons, both of males and females by themselves, in several parts of the town, now increased to a much greater number than ever." The late Dr. Payson, of Portland, whose preaching was signally blessed during his whole ministry, depended very much for success on the blessing of God in answer to his own and the united prayers of his church. The church was divided into seven districts, and the members of each district met for prayer and conversation once a month; besides a weekly conference and a weekly prayer meeting. At one time, in prospect of a revival, he said, "The church seem to feel in some measure as I could wish. Strong confidence in God, mingled with a deep sense of ill desert, and submission to his will, is displayed by them. They have a prayer meeting every evening." In the published account of the prosperous state of religion in Oneida county, N. Y., in 1826, it is said—"Prayer meetings have been numerous and frequent in most of the churches. In these little circles, Christians have enjoyed the presence of God, and have had great freedom and boldness in approaching the throne of Grace. Never have our churches generally appeared to entertain so delightful and exalted ideas of God as the hearer of prayer."

But why should I multiply examples? It is within your own observation and experience that prayer has power with God. You have seen, and can testify, that when you have been united and importunate in your supplications, the blessing has not been withheld. In the most favored seasons of special divine influences, which we have enjoyed as a church, during six years past, there has been more prayer, secret and social, than at other times. When you have cried unto the Lord, he has hearkened and heard. When two, three, or more of you have been agreed together, touching the revival of God's work—the increase of sanctification in your own souls, and the conversion of sinners—when you have pleaded for these things at the throne of Grace—even while speaking, the Lord has heard, and an answer been granted.

In conclusion, let me propose two distinct objects for social prayer. The first is a *revival of religion among ourselves*. The suspension of divine influence indicates the displeasure of God against his professing people; it is an alarming proof, that we have gone away backward from duty, and that our sins have caused him to hide his face from us! And now, if we would obtain his blessing, as in years which are past, we must, with deep repentance and humility, return and pour out our hearts in supplication before him. In this thing, then, be agreed. Consider, that without the special influence of the Spirit of God, the church can never increase in holiness; no sinners will be awakened and converted; angels will have no occasion to rejoice over scenes which they shall here witness; and heaven will receive no additions from among us, to the number of its blessed inhabitants. Behold the multitudes that seem crowding "the broad road to destruction," insensible of their guilt, and thoughtless of their danger! They draw near to death and hell! Soon they will be past hope—the day of mercy ended—their doom pronounced, and their eternal wail begun! Let the sight of your eye affect your hearts. Together lift up the voice of prayer. "O Lord, revive thy work; in the midst of the years make known; in wrath remember mercy!" Let praying companies be formed in every section of the town, to plead with God for an immediate revival of his work. "Ye that make mention of the Lord, keep not silence, and give him no rest, till he establish and till he make Jerusalem a praise in the midst of us!"

The other object of prayer which I would urge is, *the conversion of the world*. One of the most auspicious "signs of the times" is, that even now, Christians in every part of the world are generally agreed touching this vast and glorious object. The observance of the *Monthly Concert of prayer*, by Christians in Asia, Europe, and America, and in the Islands of the sea, is at once a confirmation of prophecy and a sure harbinger of the Millennium. How glorious the sight, as the sun in his diurnal march looks down upon our fallen world, and beholds, here and there, in every land, throughout his mighty circuit, companies of believers, lifting up their hearts to God in the prayer, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth, as it is done in heaven!" These prayers mingle as they ascend, and come up before the throne of infinite mercy as one great cloud of incense; and in return the skies pour down righteousness; the earth opens and brings forth salvation." Brethren, let your prayers, at the monthly concert especially, go up to heaven, with the prayers of God's people in all parts of the world! Were all, that in every place call upon the name of the Lord, united in this one object—an object that embraces the salvation of a world, and the infinite glory of the Redeemer—soon the work which Christian benevolence is laboring to accomplish would be done! Such united, universal prayer would move, with a thousand fold rapidity, the moral machinery that is now in motion, and would ensure general and extensive revivals of religion in quick succession; until great voices should be heard in heaven, saying, "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord and his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever."